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ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY IN THE HAMA REGION 2003–2005

Karin Bartl
Michel Al-Maqdissi

Résumé – Comme dans beaucoup d’autres régions du Levant, l’expansion des installations humaines commence au milieu du III^e mill. av. n. è. dans les environs de la cité de Hama. À partir de cette date, une occupation continue est documentée dans la zone la plus importante de la région, c’est-à-dire les vallées des rivières et leurs bordures immédiates. Particulièrement significatifs sont, d’une part, la concentration permanente de l’habitat dans quelques grands sites proches des rivières et, d’autre part, l’absence notable de trace d’établissement dans les régions calcaires plutôt arides de l’Ouest. La mise en valeur de ces dernières a commencé très tard, en règle générale seulement à la fin de la période romaine et au début de la période byzantine, où de nombreux petits établissements s’y développèrent. Ce modèle continua au milieu de la période islamique, alors qu’il n’est pas encore documenté à son début. L’absence de données pour d’autres périodes, comme les âges du Fer I et III, ne reflète pas forcément la réalité du terrain mais s’explique vraisemblablement par l’insuffisance des connaissances actuelles sur ces unités temporelles. Vu l’extraordinaire richesse en ressources naturelles de la région de Hama, il est difficile d’imaginer des périodes sans aucune installation humaine.

Mots-clés – Levant, Hama, installations humaines, vallées des rivières, régions calcaires, âge du Bronze, âge du Fer, périodes romaine, byzantine et islamique

Abstract – As in many other regions of the Levant, extensive settlement began in the middle of the 3rd mill. BC in the surroundings of the city of Hama as well. From that point in time onwards continuous use of this most important settlement area in the region, that is, the river valleys and the immediately bordering areas, is evidenced. Particularly noteworthy are the enduring concentration of habitation at a few large settlements near the rivers, on one hand, and, on the other, the widely absence of settlement traces in the relatively barren limestone regions to the west. The use of the latter area began rather late, to greater extent only in Late Roman/Early Byzantine times, when numerous smaller settlements arose there. This pattern continues into the Middle Islamic period, whereas it has not been evidenced yet in Early Islamic times. The absence of evidence from further periods of time, such as Iron Age I and III, does not necessarily reflect the original data, but is likely due to insufficient knowledge about the material culture of these temporal units. In view of the extraordinarily favourable abundance of natural resources in the Hama region, times of complete absence of settlement are hard to imagine.

Keywords – Levant, Hama, settlement, river valleys, limestone regions, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman/Byzantine/Medieval periods

ملخص – كما هو الحال في العديد من مناطق المشرق فإن حركة الاستيطان البشري بدأت في المنطقة المحيطة بمدينة حماة بشكل ملحوظ في منتصف الألف الثالث ق. م. اعتباراً من هذه الفترة الزمنية استمر الاستيطان بشكل واضح وموثق في أهم المناطق، أي تلك التي تقع على أطراف نهر العاصي والمناطق المحاذية له، وما يلفت الانتباه هو كثافة الاستيطان البشري في عدد من المواقع القريبة من الأنهار وأوديتها في حين نلاحظ الغياب الشبه الكامل للوجود البشري في المناطق الكلسية الجافة التي تقع إلى الغرب والتي لم تعرف أي نشاط بشري هام إلا في الفترات المتأخرة مع نهاية العصر الروماني وبداية العصر البيزنطي حيث نشأت بعض التجمعات السكانية الصغيرة. هذا النمط من الاستيطان سيستمر في أواسط العصور الإسلامية، وهو لم يُوثق بعد في بداياتها. أما غياب المعطيات للفترات الأخرى كعصرى الحديد الأول والثالث فهو لا يعكس وبالتالي فإن الغنى الكبير بالموارد الطبيعية لمنطقة حماة يجعل من الصعوبة وجود تصور فترات زمنية خالية من الاستيطان البشري.

كلمات محورية – المشرق، حماة، استيطان بشري، وديان الأنهار، مناطق كلسية، عصر البرونز، عصر الحديد، الالفترات الرومانية والبيزنطية والإسلامة

INTRODUCTION

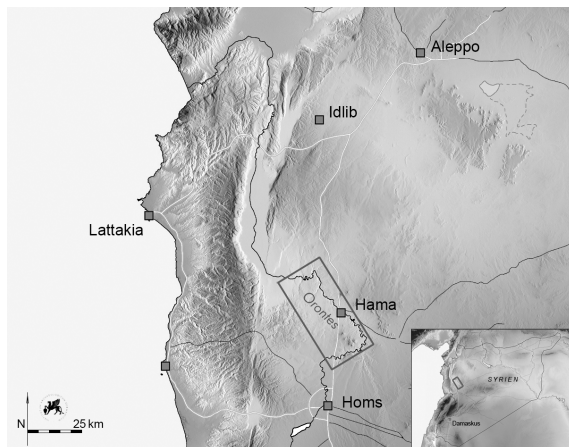


Figure 1. Location of the area of research
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Department, Th. Urban, using USGS/NASA 3-arc
second SRTM data

The archaeological survey in the Middle Orontes region, that is, in the broader surroundings of the provincial capital of Hama, was conducted during the years 2003-2005 as a joint project between the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) Damascus, and the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM), directed by K. Bartl (DAI) and M. Al-Maqdissi (DGAM).¹

The area under study encompassed in a North-South direction the landscape between Ar-Rastan and Qal'at Šayzar, in an East-West direction, a c. 10-15 km long strip of land between the east bank of the Orontes river and the limestone region in the West (**fig. 1**).² The area investigated consists of several landscapes: the river flood plain of the Orontes (arab. Nahr al-‘Āṣī, **fig. 2**), the fertile *terra rossa* areas bordering the river valley in the West, the basalt region in the Southwest and the

limestone zone in the West and Northwest. Aside from the Orontes, the Nahr as-Sārūt, whose source is in the Buqaia, is the only other perennial river in the region.³ Further water resources are numerous springs.

The annual precipitation in this area today is c. 400 mm, an amount that suffices for dry-farming. The practice of crop cultivation by means of field irrigation already began in early times along the Orontes. At least as early as Late Roman times, water-wheels —the famed *norias*— were employed for lifting water from the river, which cuts deep into the lime marl terraces.⁴ Today the river banks as well as the *terra rossa* areas are used for crop cultivation, while the river flood plan is used for vegetable and fruit growing.

1. BARTL & AL-MAQDISSI 2005; 2007; 2008; 2014. Participants of the in all five field surveys were (in alphabetical order): Massaoud Badawi, DGAM, archaeologist, pottery specialist; Franziska Bloch, DAI, archaeologist, pottery specialist; Maryam Bshesh, DGAM, engineer; Holger Dietl, University of Tübingen, archaeologist, lithic specialist; Hans Georg K. Gebel, Free University Berlin, archaeologist, lithic specialist; Martha Jung, Munich, photographer; Georges Muammar, DGAM, archaeologist; Hans-Joachim Pachur, Emeritus, Free University Berlin, geomorphologist; Christiane Römer-Strehl, University of Bonn, archaeologist, pottery specialist; Shaadi Shabo, DGAM, archaeologist; Ibrahim Shaddoud, DGAM, archaeologist, historian; Uwe Sievertsen, University of Tübingen, archaeologist, pottery specialist; Thomas Urban, Berlin, archaeologist, surveyor; Irmgard Wagner, DAI, photographer.
2. No surveys were conducted east of the Orontes, because that area is part of the project “Marges arides”, which has been carried out since the 1990s under the direction of B. Geyer (GEYER 2001; GEYER & JAUBERT 2006).
3. WIRTH 1971, p. 361ff.
4. The oldest depiction of a water wheel is shown in a mosaic from Apameia and dated to 469 AD (BALTY 1981a; DE MIRANDA 2007, fig. 44).

CONDITIONS, METHODS, PROBLEMS

Present in all of the varied landscapes of the c. 600 km² large region under study (**fig. 3**) are smaller to middle-sized tell settlements, whose maximum coverage in diameter usually does not exceed 10 ha. Furthermore, attested to the West and Northwest are numerous smaller flat settlements, in which natural karst caves were often used as dwellings, storage facilities or stables.

Archaeological prospections were concentrated first on larger, mostly clearly discernible settlement sites, whose surface material was systematically collected and documented. Starting from these places investigations were then extended into their surroundings.⁵ Moreover, detailed field surveys were made in primary settlement zones, such as along the Nahr as-Sārūt between Tall Ġarġara and Tall an-Nasriyah. This revealed that even today in very intensively cultivated areas numerous archaeological find spots had remained preserved. These often consisted only of agglomerations of artefacts, whereas places that could be defined as settlement sites are very rare.

Different large, interconnected regions, which together constituted more than one-third of the region under study, could not be prospected because of the sensitive official installations located there. A further 10-15% of the study area is sealed by modern settlements and infrastructure such as asphalt roads.⁶ Therefore, all in all only about one half of the area noted in archaeological data could be recorded.

The actual investigated area of some 300 km² disclosed a further problem: the respective kind of landscape structure and its utilisation. Due to their very fertile *terra rossa* soil, the surroundings of Hama count among the most intensively used agricultural zones in western Syria. For years large-scale levelling off and terracing land and the construction of irrigation systems have been

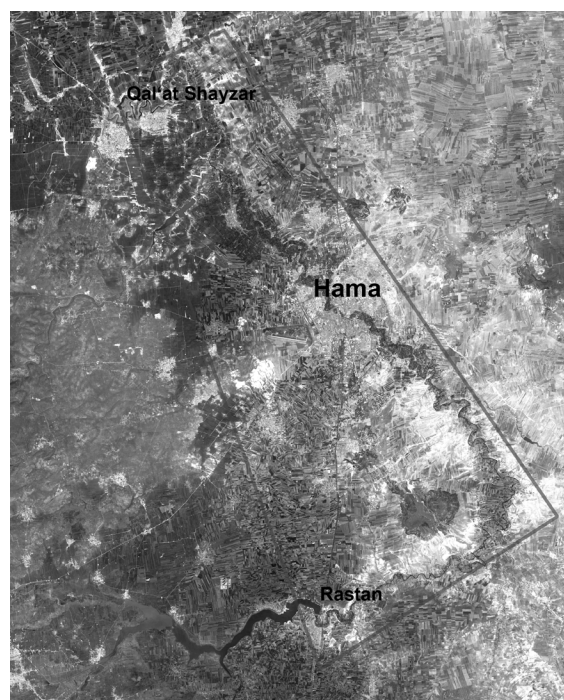


Figure 3. Middle Orontes Survey, area of research between ar-Rastan and Qal'at Šayzar
© Satellite image: Geo-eye



Figure 2. The archaeological site of Tall al-Ġāsālāt (OS 57) in the Orontes valley © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, K. Bartl

5. In preparation for the field survey use was made of various sets of maps on a scale of 1:50,000. Satellite images (Geo-Eye) were an augmentation to the databases.
6. Estimations of the size of recent localities and street surfaces can now be obtained through new satellite images. The maps available for the area under study, the most recent from the 1990s, show only a fraction of the roads that are actually present today, and also the size of localities that do not correspond to those of today. Almost without exception the size of the latter are now almost twice or sometimes even three times as large.

carried out to enlarge cultivatable surfaces and so to increase the harvest. In general, it can be presumed that through these measures of intensified agriculture a great number of small settlement sites have been largely or completely destroyed.⁷

Hence, it can be assumed that the number of sites —175 in all— that were detected during the survey represents only a portion of the original extant settlements, which possibly was double the number. These were likely primarily smaller sites, often individual compounds or groups of houses.⁸

The type of settlement that appears in the form of a ‘flat settlement’, however, was also difficult to detect in the accessible study areas. The reasons for this are foremost the relative ‘invisibility’ in size and height as well as the sparse find scatters of these sites. Thus, systematic walking surveys of larger areas were necessary. To summarise, the number of small settlements in all areas in the region of Hama was likely much higher than is perceptible today. This applies especially to those periods during which there was a distinct increase in settlements, that is, starting with the Roman period (see below).

SETTLEMENT DISTRIBUTION

During the field surveys a total of 175 find spots were documented (fig. 4). They can be divided into tall settlements, flat settlements, graves, caves and single buildings. With regard to settlement density and distribution, essentially two major periods of time can be distinguished: (1) the Bronze and Iron Ages starting with the middle of the 3rd mill. to the middle of the 1st mill. BC, and (2) the periods between the Hellenistic and Middle Islamic times, that is, between the late 4th /early 3rd cent. BC and the 13th/14th cent. AD.

Within the pre-Hellenistic periods, the Middle Bronze Age represents a time of the highest settlement density.⁹ It is quite noticeable that almost all of the settlements that were already occupied in Early Bronze Age IV display signs of their further habitation in the Middle Bronze Age. The Late Bronze Age is noted by a decline in settlement, although most of the large sites continued to exist during this time. A slight increase in settlement activity can be noted in the Iron Age. Thereby, the absence of some of the hitherto occupied sites in regions south of Hama is indeed noteworthy.

Basically, however, the image of settlement during the individual periods of the Bronze and Iron Ages do not differ greatly. Most of the larger tall settlements exhibit all settlement periods; that is to say, they were continuously inhabited. These continuously occupied places are concentrated foremost along the banks of Orontes and its tributary, the Nahr as-Sārūt. A few continuous sites lie south of Hama, but traces of settling in areas to the north and northwest of the Nahr as-Sārūt are almost completely absent.

A distinctly different settlement picture is presented by periods starting with Hellenistic times. The Hellenistic period displays a definite decrease in settlement as compared with the Iron Age. On the one hand, the occupation of areas to the south of Hama was just as strong as in the Iron Age, but hardly any traces of settlement are recognisable in the area north of the Sārūt. One important exception is Šayzar, where in Hellenistic times a new settlement was founded in the area of an older site dating back to the 2nd mill. BC or even earlier (see below). Then drastic changes occurred in Roman and above all Late Roman/Early Byzantine times. In contrast to the Hellenistic period, at this time an increase of 90% and 100% in settlement took place, in particular a massive settling of areas in the West and Northwest. However, these new settlements are rather small, and therefore this increase is surely not

7. One example of this destruction is site OS 161. This small site on the north bank of the Sārūt dates to the Late Neolithic; during the autumn survey in 2005 it could still be documented. At that time terracing had already begun in the area. By the spring of 2006 the settlement was completely eliminated.

8. All larger tell settlements were documented, even though they could not always be surveyed in detail: for example, in the case of Tall Darqū (OS 38) and Tall Mitnīn (OS 47).

9. The number of settlement sites during the individual periods is based on the preliminary evaluation of pottery made during field research. Here many thanks are extended to M. Badawi, U. Sievertsen and C. Römer-Strehl for their work. The pottery of the Bronze and Iron Ages is in its final phase of evaluation, so that a definitive assignment of the sherds to settlement periods could still change somewhat. Therefore, the numbers at hand now should be viewed as preliminary data.

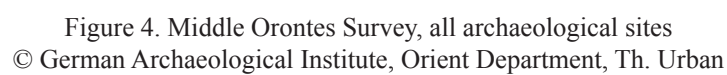


Figure 4. Middle Orontes Survey, all archaeological sites
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to be assessed as a doubling in settlement area or population. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the number of settlements in Late Roman and early Byzantine times almost matches that of the present-day settlement and encompassed all parts of the area under study. A similarly intense settlement density, but with a different distribution pattern, is attested in Middle Islamic times.

SETTLEMENT PERIODS

Early Bronze Age IV

Early Bronze Age IV (2400-2000 BC) is the first period in time represented by substantial settling activities. A total of 34 settlement sites were attested, corresponding to phase Hama J (**fig. 5**).¹⁰ It is indeed noteworthy that almost all of the larger tells display traces of settlement from this period. Smaller sites were occupied during this time as well, as demonstrated by the settlements Tall Darqū (OS 38), Tall Mansur (OS 16) and Tall ‘Aīn Ġubb ad-Dam (OS 54), south of Hama. Among the most important settlement sites of this period were likely Tall an-Nasriyah (OS 28-29), located at the confluence of the Sārūt and Orontes rivers, and Tall Arzah (OS 51) on the west bank of the Orontes. Tall Arzah, like Tall Rabun (OS 53) and Tall as-Sūs (OS 59), is situated upon a natural rock ridge, and is smaller in size than it appears at first sight. The tell evidently had a larger ‘lower town’; there numerous ‘Hama beakers’ were found (**fig. 6**). A further find spot that yielded numerous fragments of Hama beakers as well as a great amount of human bones is site OS 71, southeast of Tall an-Nasriyah. It might have been part of a cemetery. The site was destroyed by bulldozer work.

Middle Bronze Age

In the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1600 BC; = Hama H), a similar distribution of settlement as in the Early Bronze Age can be noted. Thereby, there is a slight increase in sites —36 places— located above all south of Hama (**fig. 7**). Accordingly, this period of time shows the highest settlement density among the Bronze and Iron Ages. Tall an-Nasriyah (OS 28-29) was probably the largest community by far of the Middle Bronze Age. The site consists of a small-sized settlement mound and a spacious lower town, which is enclosed by two wall constructions in the East and in the North. In the West the Orontes River provided natural protection. Between 2007 and 2010 Tall an-Nasriyah was the subject of archaeological investigations.¹¹

Late Bronze Age

Settlement sites attested for this period are 30 in number, at present. During the Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 BC; = Hama G) there is a slight decrease in settling in the southeast and northeast of the area under study (**fig. 8**). Judging from the amount and scatter of surface material found during the survey, none of the settlement sites of this period seems to have been of any special importance. Only the site of Šayzar/Sizara/Sinzar (OS 22) stands out through its frequent mention in historical sources: in view of its prominent location at the transition of the Orontes tableland to the plain of Ghab, it can be designated as the most important site of the Late Bronze Age in this region.¹² No finds dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages could be noted on the surface, due to the massive overlying ruins from the Hellenistic to the Middle Islamic period.

10. All of the settlement periods discussed here were evidenced during the years-long excavations at Tall Hama, which serves as the closest reference point for the surface material (FUGMANN 1958; PAPANICOLAOU CHRISTENSEN 1971; PAPANICOLAOU CHRISTENSEN, THOMSEN & PLOUG 1986; PENTZ 1997; PLOUG 1985; PLOUG *et al.* 1969; RIIS 1948; RIIS & BUHL 1990; RIIS & POULSEN 1957; THUESEN 1988).

11. AL-MAQDISSI, PARAYRE & SAUVAGE 2009, 2010a, 2011 ; AL-MAQDISSI, PARAYRE, SAUVAGE, SHADDOUD *et al.* 2012; DE DAPPER 2010; TENU & ROTTIER 2010; FAIVRE 2010; SHADDOUD 2010.

12. GRAWEHR 2014.

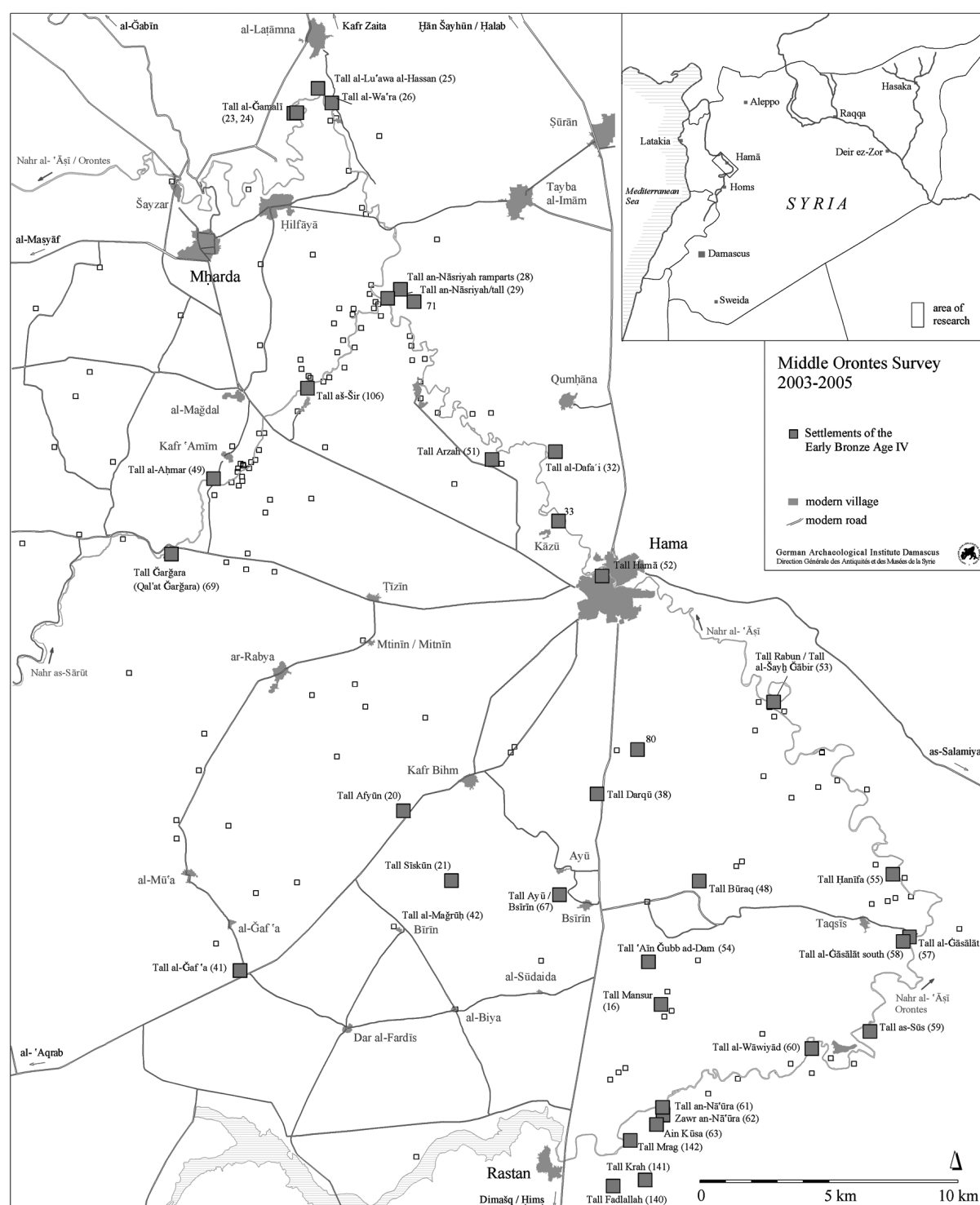


Figure 5. Middle Orontes Survey, settlements of the Early Bronze Age IV
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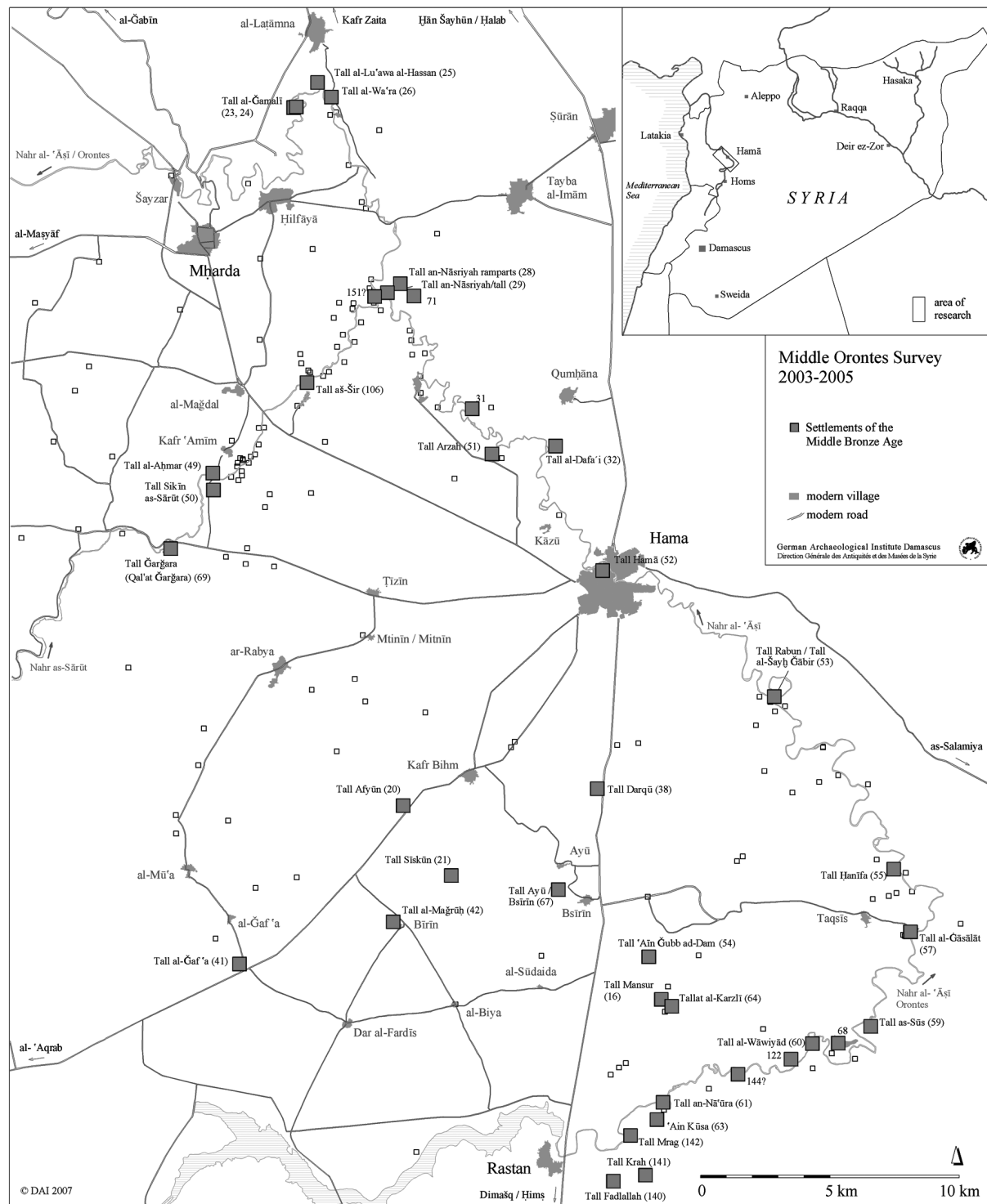


Figure 7. Middle Orontes Survey, settlements of the Middle Bronze Age
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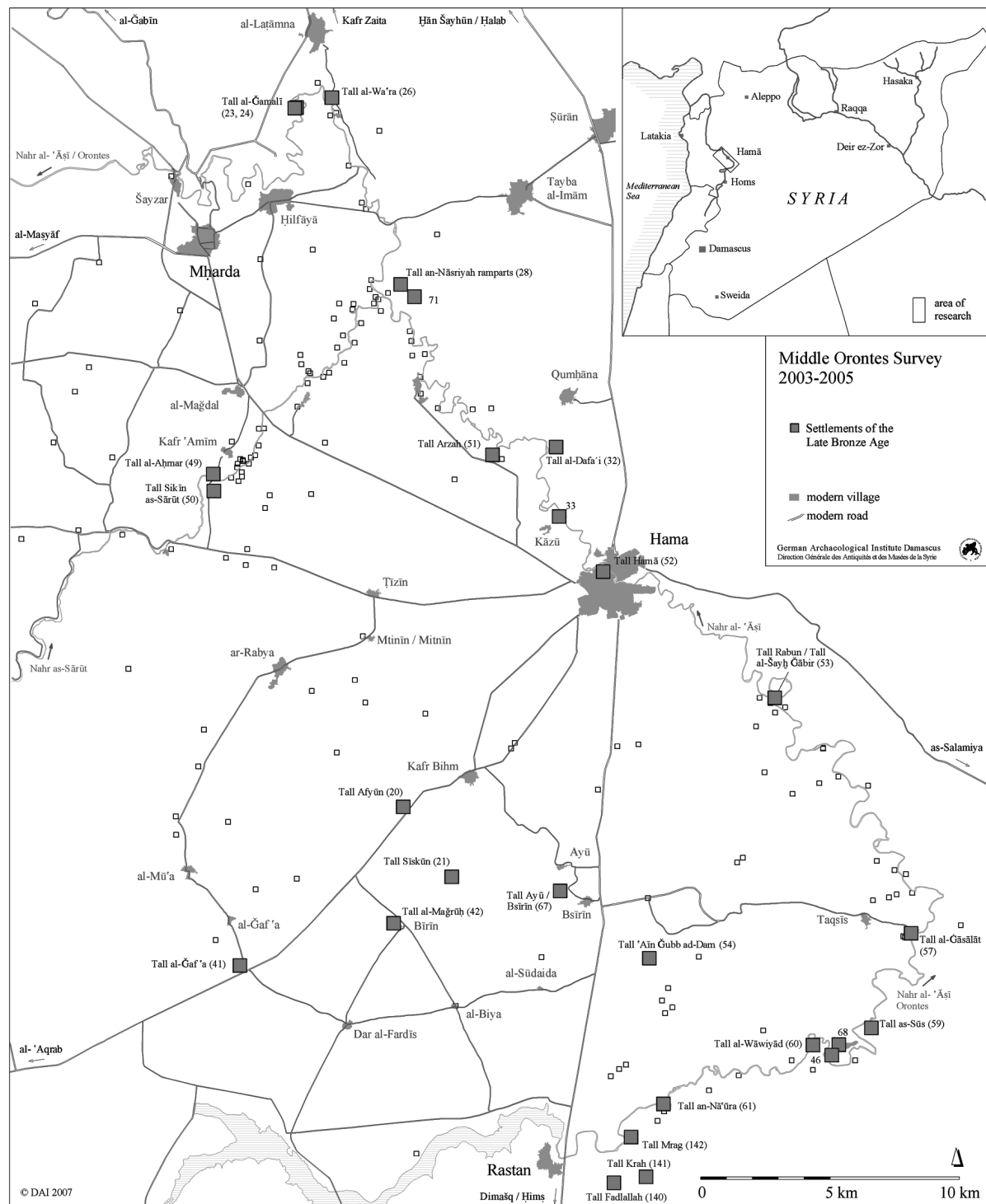


Figure 8. Middle Orontes Survey, settlements of the Late Bronze Age
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Iron Age

The Iron Age (1200-333 BC; = Hama F-E) is confirmed by the presence of 26 settlements (**fig. 9**). A more exact differentiation of phases basing on the surface material collected is not possible. Iron Age I (1200-1000 BC) is represented by only few examples of pottery, and examples of Iron Age III / Achaemenid time (550-333 BC) are completely absent. The majority of pottery can be assigned to the phase Iron Age II (1000-550 BC), a period in time, which in historical regard is marked by the autonomy of the kingdom of Hamath with its capital by the same name and in the second phase —starting in 720 BC— by Assyrian domination. As of 715 BC an Assyrian garrison was stationed in the city of Hama. The subsequent Late Babylonian period (626-550 BC) and the Achaemenid period are neither visible in the archaeological remains in the city of Hama nor in survey finds. The sequence in settlement in the Tall of Hama (OS 52) is marked by a hiatus between the 6th and 2nd cent. BC. Thus, in an archaeological context, Tall an-Nasriyah can be named as one of the important settlement sites of this period in the surroundings of Hama.

Hellenistic period

With a reduction to only 20 sites, the Hellenistic period (333-65 BC; = Hama D) presents a distinct break in settlement history (**fig. 10**).¹³ Here Šayzar can be designated as the most important site, where a new settlement for veterans named Larissa was founded. The frequent mention of this place in historical Hellenistic and Roman sources, which otherwise are not available for any site of the region, confirm its importance for the whole area during this period. Compared to the Iron Age, the distribution of find spots displays settling activities in the area to the south of Hama, especially the renewed settlement of smaller sites such as Tall 'Aīn Ġubb ad-Dam (OS 16). In addition, new settlements emerged, particularly in the area north of the Nahr as-Sārūt.

Roman and Late Roman/Early Byzantine times

The Roman and Late Roman/Early Byzantine periods (65 BC-AD 636; = Hama B) are the periods with the highest settlement density. Sites of this time span are represented by 38 and 40 sites respectively (**fig. 11-12**). Traces of settlement are found in the entire area under study, even where previously only few sites or none at all were attested. This image of settlement corresponds with the results from surveys in many other regions in the Levant as well and is often explained as the result of the political situation at that time, which was characterised by a comparably long period of peace.¹⁴ The settlement structure in the Hama region is indicated by the appearance of many smaller settlements, constituted by several compounds or single buildings, which probably existed amidst areas used for agriculture. The utilisation of hitherto unsettled areas leads to questions such as economic forms and the structure of the landscape during this period of time. It is conceivable that here like in other regions of the Roman Empire a latifundia economy arose, run by dependent farmers, and, in addition, that opposite earlier periods, possibly the landscape had changed, now exhibiting almost solely cultivated areas instead of the original vegetation.

Islamic period

The Islamic period is divided into the Early Islamic time of the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties (650-1000) and the Middle Islamic time of various individual dynasties, the Crusaders, and the Mamluks (c. 1000-1500; = Hama A). The first phase is not evidenced in surface material. Comparable material is not present in Hama, as there buildings of Late Antiquity on the tell were modified and used further

13. On the course of settling in the middle Orontes region during Hellenistic to Middle Islamic times, see BARTL 2008.

14. WATSON 2008, p. 447, fig. 14.1; WILKINSON 2003.

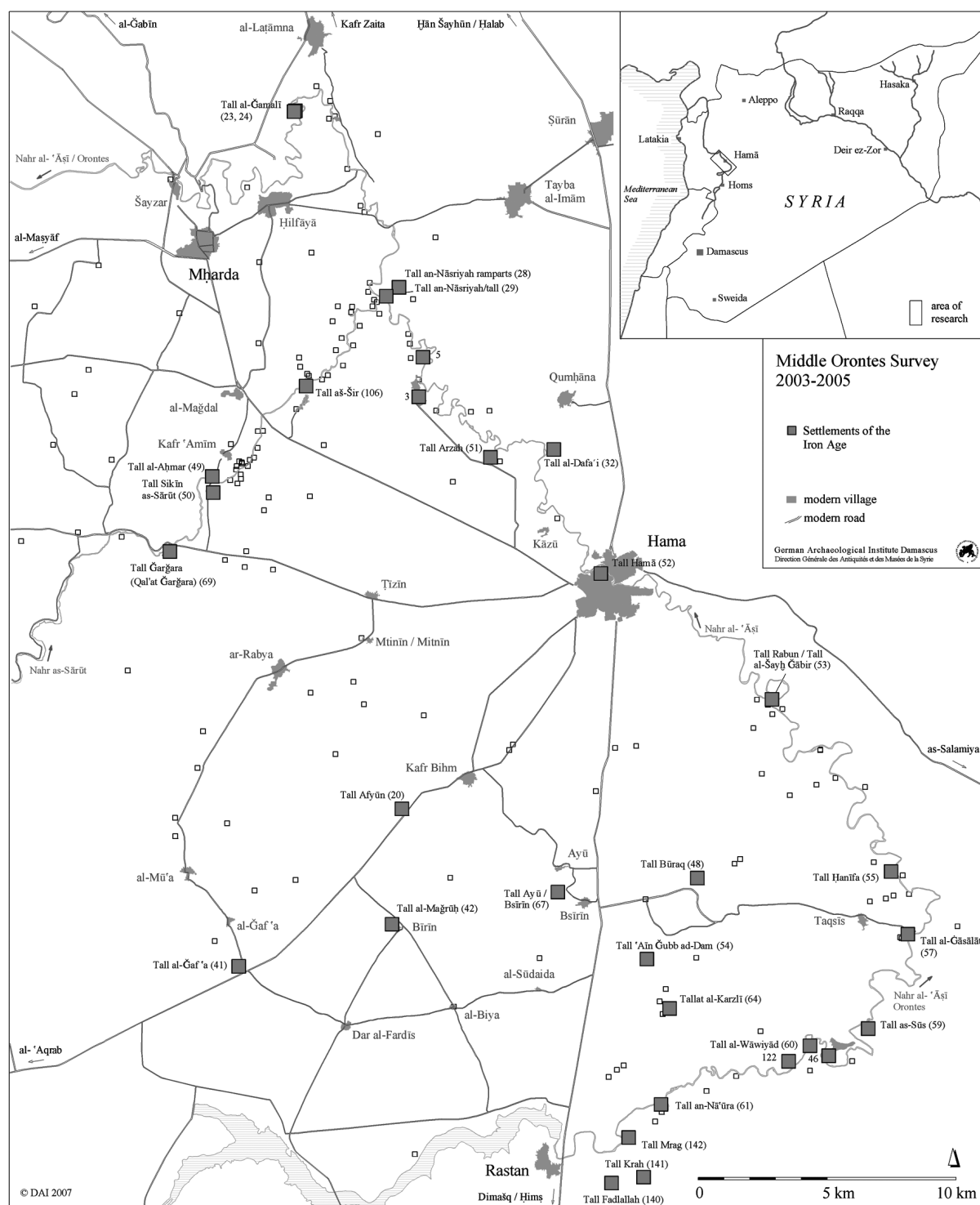


Figure 9. Middle Orontes Survey, settlement of the Iron Age © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, Th. Urban

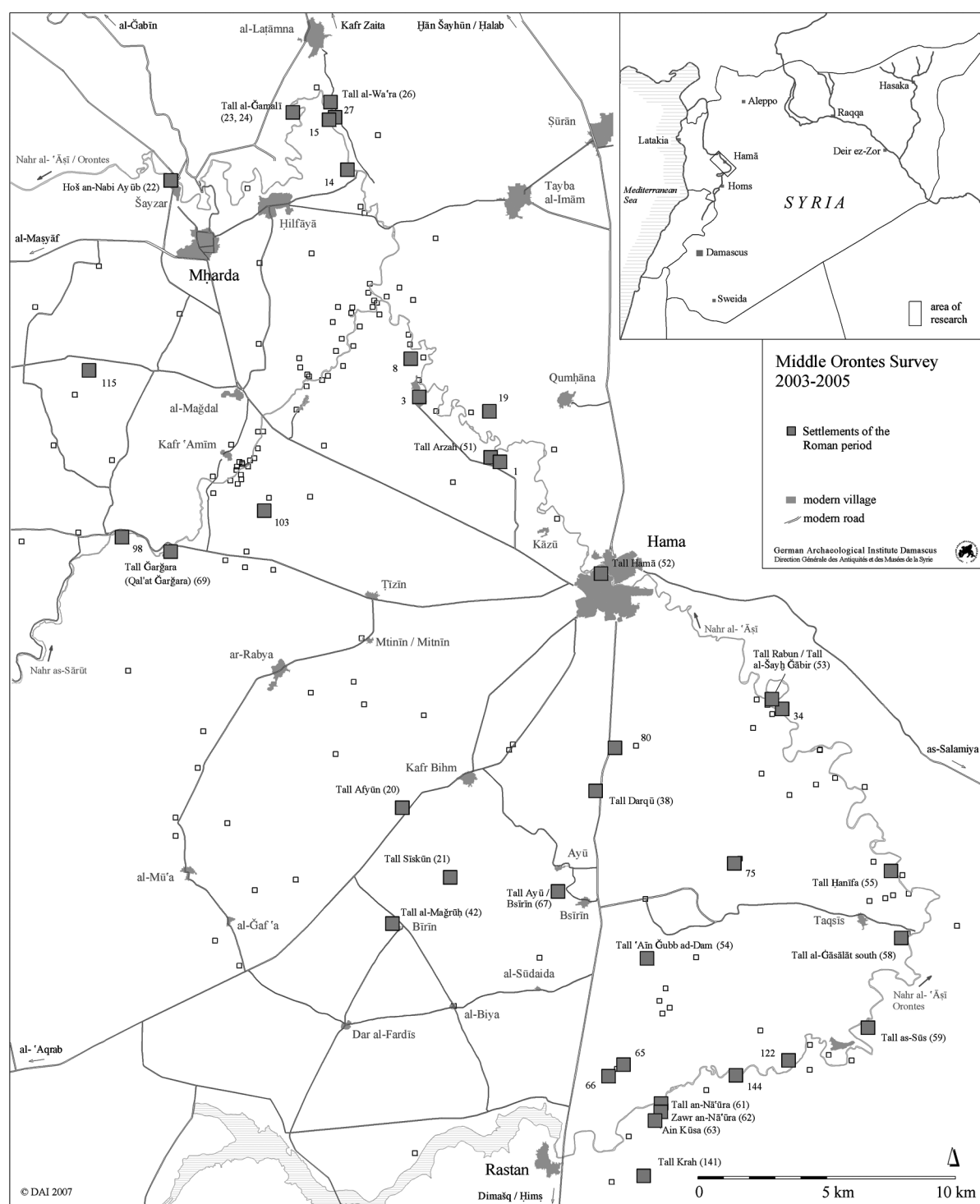


Figure 11. Middle Orontes Survey, settlements of the Roman period © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, Th. Urban

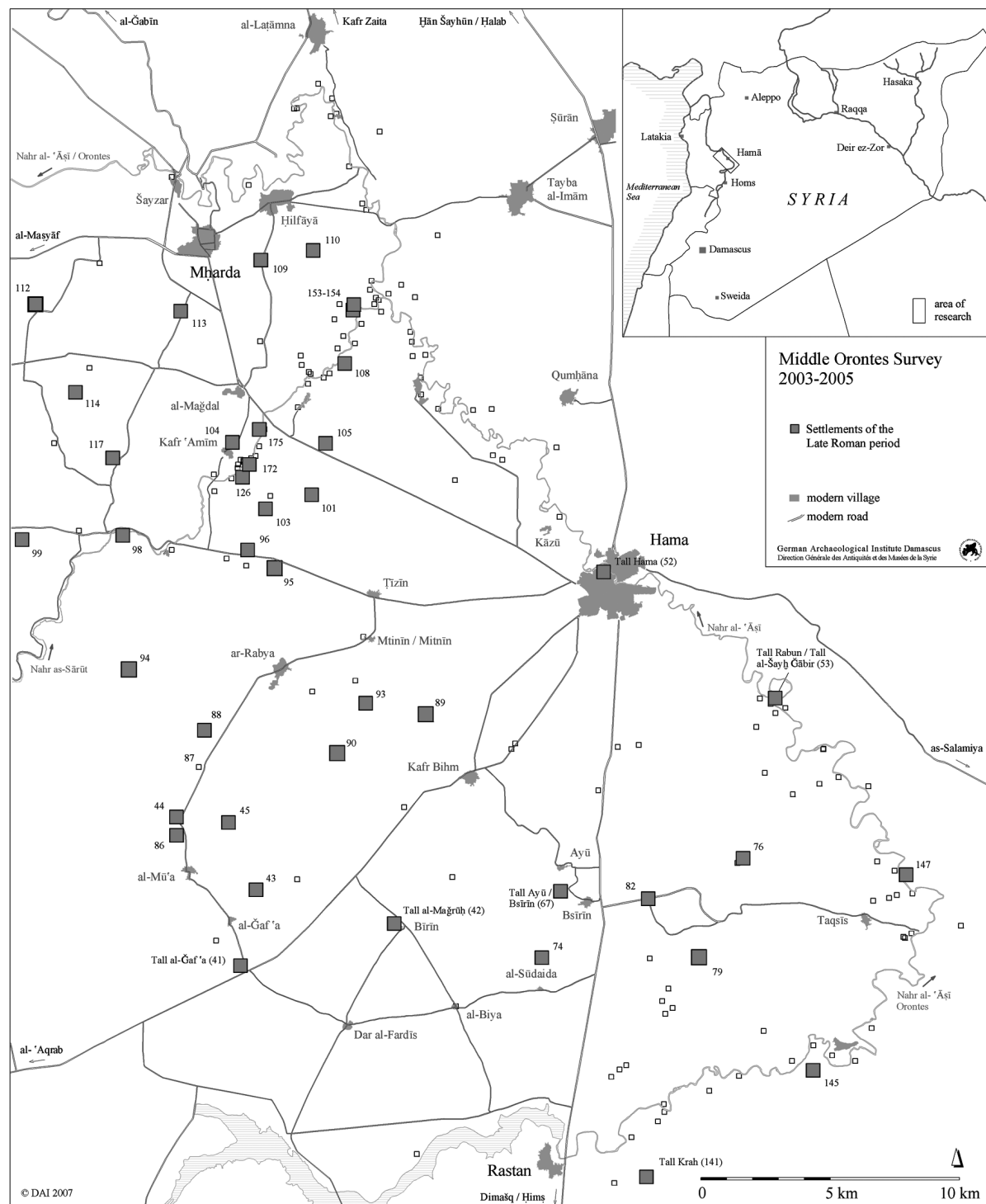


Figure 12. Middle Orontes Survey, settlements of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period
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during the Umayyad phase. A total of 42 find spots are known for Middle Islamic times, some of which are new settlements in the western part of the area under study (**fig. 13**). Next to the city of Hama, the most important settlement, the town of Šayzar was the second most important supraregional place during this time.

The location site of Šayzar consists of two different topographical areas: (1) Qal'at Šayzar, a fortress of the Middle Islamic period, located upon a narrow elongated rock ridge above the Orontes river,¹⁵ and (2) the actual settlement of Šayzar, the area of the tell located below the fortress in the west. Today about two-thirds of the tell are covered by the modern village of Šayzar.

Between 2007 and 2010 various archaeological investigations were undertaken in the area of the tell and the village as part of a cooperation project of the German Archaeological Institute Damascus (DAI) and Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM). They included an intensive survey of the terrain to document pottery and spolia, geophysical prospection in the west part of the tell that was not superimposed by modern buildings, and soundings in the north of the tell. Results until now show that Šayzar/Larissa covered a maximum expanse of c. 24 ha, thus making it one of the largest settlements in the area under study (**fig. 14**). Geomagnetic prospection revealed a rectangular street plan. The soundings revealed a multi-phased succession of well preserved architecture, where by the uppermost layers date to the Middle Islamic period (**fig. 15**).¹⁶

Ottoman times

Very few monuments from Ottoman times are preserved in the region. Amongst them are the stone foundations of the *norias*, which are still quite visible at intervals of c. 1 km along the Orontes between ar-Rastan and Qal'at Šayzar as well as the remains of the adjoining water mills, such as in Ginān (OS 36, **fig. 16**). Also present are a few remains of buildings, such as those of an oil mill in Gor al-Aṣi. The ruins can likely be dated to late Ottoman times: the 18th to beginning 20th cent.

CONCLUSION

As in many other regions of the Levant, extensive settlement began in the middle of the 3rd mill. BC in the surroundings of the city of Hama as well. From that point in time onwards continuous use of this most important settlement area in the region, that is, the river valleys and the immediately bordering areas, is evidenced. Particularly noteworthy are the enduring concentration of habitation at a few large settlements near the rivers, on one hand, and, on the other, the widely absence of settlement traces in the relatively barren limestone regions to the west. The use of the latter area began rather late, to greater extent only in Late Roman/Early Byzantine times, when numerous smaller settlements arose there. This pattern continues into the Middle Islamic period, whereas it has not been evidenced yet in Early Islamic times. The absence of evidence from further periods of time, such as Iron Age I and III does not necessarily reflect the original data, but is likely due to insufficient knowledge about the material culture of these temporal units. In view of the extraordinarily favourable abundance of natural resources in the Hama region, times of complete absence of settlement like in the Chalcolithic period (6th-5th mill. Cal BC) are hard to imagine.

15. TONGHINI 2011.

16. GRAWEHR & ALBACHKAMI 2010.

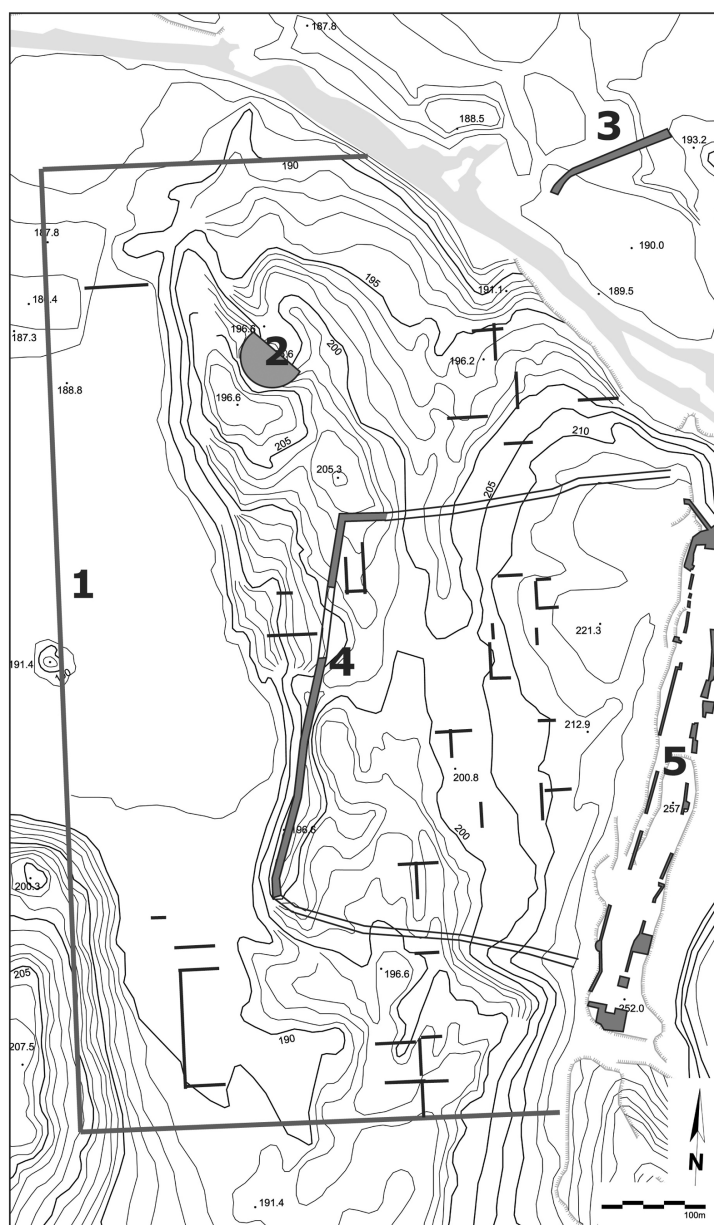


Figure 14. Preliminary archaeological map of the settlement of Šayzar. 1. Hypothetical course of the Hellenistic city wall. 2. Possible location of a theatre. 3. Bridge. 4. Presumed course of the city wall in the 12th cent. 5. Fortress © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, C. Rüdiger, M. Grawehr



Figure 15. Test sounding 2010 at the northwestern part of the tall at Šayzar, remains of the Medieval settlement (12th cent.) © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, A. Ahrens



Figure 16. Middle Orontes Survey, remains of the noria and water mill at Ginān (OS 36) © German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, Th. Urban